

**“Are You Full of Yourself?”**  
**Luke 14:1-14**  
**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 2, 2007**

There is an old expression used to describe people who are primarily centered upon themselves. I know you have all heard it before. If it’s a guy you’re talking about, that expression goes something like, “He’s full of himself.”<sup>1</sup> You have heard words like that, right? You know people like that, right? It’s hard to carry on a conversation with people who are full of themselves. They tend to know it all. They always have an answer or explanation for everything you say. They will try to correct your every word. The really sad part about those who are full of themselves is that there is really no room for anyone or anything that differs from their particular understanding of life. And there is definitely no room for God.

The Pharisees were like that. They were so full of themselves that they had no room for anyone or anything that differed from their particular understanding of life—and that included anything new God just might be doing in their world. This morning’s story is an excellent example. Luke begins it by saying that Jesus was invited to be the guest of honor at a Sabbath meal at the home of a local Pharisee. Many of the other Pharisees in town were invited as well, each wanting to check out this heralded young rabbi. Now it is no big secret that Jesus and the Pharisees mixed like oil and water; that they did not approve of most of the things that this former carpenter from Nazareth was doing and saying. It is also no big secret that the Pharisees held the Sabbath in the highest regard. They believed they knew everything there was to know about how a person of faith should honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. So the fact that Jesus was the Sabbath guest of honor in one of their homes, while so many of the other Pharisees were watching absolutely everything that he did and listening to absolutely everything that he said—well, to describe that situation as a powder keg probably doesn’t do it justice. You just know that something big was going to happen, and happen soon.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge United Methodist Bishop Robert C. Morgan (Retired) for many of the thoughts and the direction of this sermon.

Sure enough, we don't have to wait too long for that something to happen. Before they even were able to sit down at the dinner table, a man with dropsy entered the outdoor patio where they had all gathered for the occasion. Today we call dropsy "edema," the abnormal accumulation of fluid in the body. It is a symptom of several different diseases, which need not be discussed here. The only two things we need to know is that this man was suffering and it was the Sabbath. Remember again that the Pharisees were sticklers for the Sabbath, taking its observance far beyond that which the law ever intended. Since their way of thinking was common knowledge in that day, Jesus immediately confronted them. He asked, "Tell me, is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath? Yes or no?" Now the Pharisees were smart enough to know they were being baited, so they remained silent, waiting to see what Jesus would do, wondering if he would do the "work" which they had decided was expressly forbidden to do on the Sabbath. And sure enough, he did it. He healed that suffering man right then and there and then sent him on his way, thereby working of the Sabbath. But before the Pharisees even had a chance to raise their angry voices, Jesus asked them another question. "Is there anyone here who, if a child or an animal fell down a well, wouldn't rush to pull him out immediately, not asking whether or not it was the Sabbath?" Now not only was this question based on good common sense, but it was also one based upon the Pharisees' own legal tradition. After generations of debate they had determined that it was indeed lawful to pull a child or an animal out of a dangerous situation on the Sabbath. It was the right thing to do. So if that was the case, as Jesus' question reasoned, isn't it also right to "pull" this man out of another dangerous situation by healing him? Now I have to believe that they knew the answer was "Yes," but to admit that it would cause them to have to rethink their whole understanding about the nature of work on the Sabbath. And to do that might force them to admit that their old way of thinking just might be a bit dated, that they hadn't considered that particular angle, that in this situation God just might be acting in a brand new way. Jesus' question had not only put them on the spot, but it had also put them firmly in their place. But rather than acknowledging that it did, rather than saying that they just might be wrong, rather than confessing that they may have made an oversight, the Pharisees simply chose to say nothing.

Lucky for them, it was just about that time that the host called them to the table. When he did so, there was a scramble for seats. Now the one detail of this story that Luke leaves to our imagination is just exactly when Jesus offered this parable. Was it before or after the Pharisees rushed to sit down? Based on the fact that dinners like these were so much more than friendly get-togethers, based on the fact that the seats closest to the host were the seats of honor, and based on the assumption that the majority of the Pharisees fit that old “full of themselves” expression quite nicely, I have to imagine that it was only probably after everyone had sat down that Jesus told his parable. I have to imagine that he probably stood there and watched that mad dash for the best seats in the house, the pushing and positioning that went on to occupy the places of honor at the banquet table. Finally, I also have to imagine that after everyone had sat down and after they all had found their seats, they looked up and saw that Jesus, the guest of honor and the main reason they had been invited to dinner in the first place, had chosen the seat at the very end of the table. The one who had just put them in their place had done it again. So as the host stood and started to escort Jesus to the place he had intended him to sit all along, Jesus’ words became so much more than some mental exercise or a course in proper table etiquette. You heard it before, but listen to it again from a different translation:

*“When somebody invites you to dinner, don’t take the place of honor. The host might have invited somebody more important than you. Then he’ll come and call out in front of everybody, ‘You’re in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.’ Red-faced, you’ll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left. When you’re invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, ‘Friend, come up to the front.’ That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I’m saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up falling on your face. But if you’re content to simply be yourself, you will become more than yourself.”*

Now I have got to imagine that they were somewhat shaken by Jesus’ words. You would think that even people who are full of themselves have some sense of common decency. Humility had always been a virtue that every good Jew tried to cultivate. The

Pharisees should have remembered how the book of Proverbs told them how God shows favor to the humble or how the prophet Isaiah reminded them that God dwells with “those who are contrite and humble in spirit.” They should have remembered the Wisdom of Sirach, which says that, “The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds and it will not rest until it reaches its goal.” And since they were so interested in everything Jesus had said and done, they had to have already known that he had told his disciples “Blessed are the meek” and “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit”—both ideas that centered upon the idea of humility. They probably also knew that he had once placed a small child in the circle of his followers and then told them that in order to receive God’s kingdom, they had to receive it with the same humility and faith that a child would receive it. Oh, the concept of humility would not have been new to the Pharisees by any stretch of the imagination, but then again, those who are “full of themselves” have usually put that concept on the back burner of their lives.

Now please understand: while all the pushing, shoving, and status seeking that went on at that dinner table was absolutely repugnant to Jesus, that wasn’t the main reason he offered this parable. He was not just asking them to be humble for humility’s sake, neither was he giving them a new way to get the best seat in the house. It was much more than that. As I mentioned earlier, those who are full of themselves have no room for anyone or anything else but themselves. The person who believes that he or she has all the answers, the man or woman who knows that he or she is right, the one who think he or she always knows how it is supposed to be, is not likely to “seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.” Those persons who say, “This is the way it is and has always been,” have blinded themselves to the possibility of what it can be or will be. If they believe that God’s voice is confined to the past, then they become deaf to God’s word in the present, as well as blind to the possibilities for God’s presence in the future. This was Jesus’ biggest complaint against the Pharisees. I wonder if it could be God’s biggest complaint against you and me?

Wash Bailey was the oldest member of the Mississippi Annual Conference. When he was just a young pup of 90, I would see him every time we had a District meeting.

Still sharp and always dressed in a sports coat and tie, he would sit erect in his folding chair and listen intently to everything our DS had to say, asking pertinent questions and calling us all on the carpet when he believed we were not doing what we were supposed to be doing. In 1988, Bob Morgan became his bishop. Wash was 98 years old at the time. Bishop Morgan would visit him quite often, and Wash never failed to ask him if he had a church for him to serve. After his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Bishop Morgan reported to the Annual Conference that during a recent visit, he had asked the old preacher, “Have you lived your whole life in Mississippi?” His response was classic Wash Bailey. “Not yet,” he replied.<sup>2</sup> He knew, you see, that God was not yet finished with his life. He understood that there was so much more for him to do. And he was right, as Wash lived for two more years. His funeral was not only a celebration for a life well lived, but a reminder that ours is not a God confined to yesterday, but one who stands with us today and walks with us into tomorrow—the God who was, who is, and who is to come.

Those who are humble know that. Humility is not self-depreciation. It is not some false sense of modesty. Rather, those who are humble simply understand that ours is a living and active God, that God’s works are not confined to the pages of the past, that God is the one who has created and is creating. Those who are humble not only know that God is still at work, but are also open to all the possibilities that knowledge brings. And they understand that God’s world is bigger than they ever imagined. Those who are full of themselves, however, have a very difficult time with that concept. Those who are not humble have a very difficult time making room for a big world or an ever-active God. Because they already have the answers, they already know what is right. And because they do, like the Pharisees before them, the new life, which God so graciously offers, simply passes them by.

It is my prayer that when you come to the table this morning you will do so as one who is not full of him or herself. It is my great hope that you can eat the bread and drink the cup as one who understands that the God you meet at this table is not confined to yesterday, but one who stands by you today and willing to go with you into tomorrow.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Morgan, Who’s Coming to Dinner?, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992, p. 104